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ABSTRACT

Rather than simply recreating a real or imagined event or experience for entertainment purposes, the wisdom stories of the American Indians were sophisticated teaching devices that kept alive the history and traditions of the tribe at the same time that they instructed the young tribe members in the areas of history, geography, nature study, and ethics. Centuries old, these stories were passed by word of mouth from generation to generation and their telling was entrusted to persons who were highly respected within the tribe. Each story was constructed so as to stimulate inductive and deductive thinking by providing alternate viewpoints and by challenging the listener to formulate individual conclusions. Some of the concepts and principles that are found consistently in Indian wisdom literature include the following: an Indian is a human being capable of good and bad behavior, who lives according to the traditions of the fathers; the word "different" does not involve a value judgment; decision making is a human function and the only wrong decisions are choices never made; everything is alive and has a spirit, even rocks and trees; and power is the capacity to overcome human weakness without physical dominance, rather than the ability to rule others. (MAI)

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Indian Wisdom Stories

A Paper

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by

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Indian Wisdom Stories

Introduction

After listening to several Indian stories about Coyote and other animal people, Denny Derosia, a Seattle, Washington school boy, wrote his own story. The unedited version follows:

"Once, far, far back when there were no people, the animals were peaceful ones and one of the most helpful ones was the great Coyote. The great Coyote had been helpful many times."

"Well, one fine day the Coyote was taking a walk and he saw his brother the fox. He liked his brother and his brother liked him."

"As he went on walking he saw a bubbling brook. He bent down to get a drink when in the water he saw himself. He thought, 'I wonder how the Eagle is? He stole my name. I would like an excuse to kill Eagle very much.' But the Coyote couldn't find an excuse so he went on until he came to the Eagle's nest. He went up to the Eagle's nest but didn't find Eagle. He knew it was past lunch time. 'Maybe he's in trouble!' The Coyote called upon his magic powers and he got a ball. It showed the wolf ready to eat Eagle. He thought he should help Eagle so he left running his fastest to kill Wolf."

"Coyote ran ten miles, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty and he finally got there and rested. Then he got ready but he had never fought a wolf. He wondered if he could. So he went in the cave. The wolf had him down. He called upon his magic powers and the wolf turned to dust and blew away."

"The eagle said, 'Why did you do that? I stole your name.' 'Well,' said Coyote, 'I was told when the Great Spirit told me to help anybody

that I had to. That's why even now I'd like to kill you but I can't for no reason.'"

"Two days later the Coyote saw the Eagle killing fish so he ran and killed him."

Denny's story may not exactly parallel Coyote stories told by master Colville or Nez Perce' storytellers, but Denny's story has a certain amount of accuracy. His account of Coyote's experience reflects a definite exposure to similar stories and the teachings inherent in them. For instance, Denny talked about a time when there were no "people," or human beings, inhabiting the earth, a time when animals co-existed peacefully, as brothers. Coyote was portrayed in Denny's story as a helpful animal, an animal with special powers, and not a bloodthirsty, vicious, and dumb creature. Of course Coyote was somewhat jealous of Eagle's name, but the story clearly conveys the idea that Coyote would not kill another animal for such an "excuse." The story ends, however, with Eagle's death, which is not due to Coyote's vengeance but is due to the fact that Eagle has been killing fish, apparently without proper cause. There are several other themes carried out in Denny's story, too, which reflect his learning about American Indian philosophy toward animal influence and behavior in the cycle of life. Denny's story obviously shows little influence from Jane and Bill or Dr. Seuss, but it definitely indicated his exposure to Coyote and other Indian wisdom stories.

Definition and Purpose

"Wisdom story" is a better reference term than "legend," "tale," "narrative," or the simple "story," because wisdom stories go beyond

the singular intent to re-create real or imagined events and experiences. That is not to say that Indian wisdom stories are never fictional or that some stories are not retained purely for their entertainment value. As Ella Clark pointed out in her book, Indian Legends from the Northern Rockies, "Many of the storytellers were superb actors. . . . Their facial expressions, voices, and gestures almost told the tale without words as they entertained eager listeners with amusing stories, tales of adventure and war, horror stories, and myths and legends of the wondrous days of long ago."[1] Many Indian wisdom stories are full of wit and hilarity, too. Ohiyesa (Sioux) spoke to the point: "There is scarcely anything so exasperating to me as the idea that the natives of this country have no sense of humor and no faculty for mirth. . . . I have often spent an entire evening in laughing with them until I could laugh no more. There are evenings when the recognized wit or story-teller of the village gives a free entertainment which keeps the rest of the community in a convulsive state until he leaves them."[2]

These wisdom stories have excellent entertainment value, especially for the young, but they are highly instructive, too. Clark stressed this by saying, "Storytelling, however, was not for entertainment only. In the childhood of my principal Nez Perce' informant, Otis Halfmoon, special winter lodges were made partly underground, which were heated with hot rocks. There the most highly respected storytellers, one for the boys and one for the girls, taught the children in story form, preparing them for their lives as adults close to nature.'"[3] According to Steiner, Mrs. Clara Moore, who lives on the Colville Reservation in Washington, recalled that "in her youth stories 'were unwritten texts in history,

geography, nature study and ethics.'"[4] So, Indian wisdom stories can and should be appreciated on another level, a level which symbolizes what is true, right, lasting, of good judgment, or wise. Naturally the predominant content of the stories is based upon "wisdom" from the American Indian tradition and value system, a broad term encompassing many tribal differences. Nonetheless, all tribes have individual oral histories which are closely related to their wisdom stories, and the stories are partial records of their unique religions, languages, customs, beliefs, and traditions. In Clark's words, "Fables and other narratives gave moral and ethical instruction to youth as their elders sought to develop in them the ideals of the tribe. One of the sacred duties of the elders of the tribes was to hand down the traditions to the younger generations. Thus the winter storytelling preserved the continuity of the tribe by keeping alive its history and its significant traditions. The best storytellers were highly respected by their people; they were not only entertainers, but also teachers, historians, and guardians of the sacred ceremonies."[5]

Told from Memory

Until recently there have been few printed copies for reference and review, a fact which makes wisdom stories all the more impressive. This has apparently been an insignificant problem to the Native American, since the wisdom stories were and still are skillfully told from memory. In 1891 an Oglala Sioux judge, Four Guns, contrasted the white man's insatiable desire for printed documents with the Indians' capacity for memory: "The Indian needs no writings; words that are true sink deep into his heart where they remain; he never forgets them. On the other

hand, if the white man loses his papers, he is helpless. I once heard one of their preachers say that no white man was admitted to heaven unless there were writings about him in a great book."[6] Steiner's remarks were consistent with Four Gun's: "Modern man--book-weary, literate, multilingual--has been baffled and fascinated by the ability of the Indian to recite from his tribal memory. . . . But the illiterate Indian knew the unwritten history of things that had happened hundreds of years before as he knew his daily life. The mind of the Indian was a time machine. His memory was his reality."[7] Since spoken words have always been special communicative devices to Indians, words have long been treated with respect and carefully-developed skill, a fact so clearly demonstrated by tribal storytellers. Jones was certainly impressed and he wrote, "My first impression on my trek into red man's story land was the immensity of the number of meaningful folk tales which their storytellers had at their command. These seemed endless indeed. The second impression was the skill with which these fables, shall we call them, might be told. This last trait, of course, called for long experience and training--a feature often overlooked by those who only scan the surface of things."[8]

Other Distinguishing Characteristics

There are other ways, too, in which Indian wisdom stories differ from traditional non-Indian American legends, tales, or stories. To begin with, wisdom stories are much older than non-Indian American history, and, specifically, much older than such events as Columbus' invasion or Tom Dooley's hanging. The most prominent characteristic of the stories is the fact that they were passed on word-of-mouth rather than in printed

form, as pointed out earlier, and some of the stories are literally centuries old. In fact, many wisdom stories have passed the proverbial judgment of quality, the test of time. The longevity factor was attested to by Chief Elias Johnson (Tuscarora): "On long winter evenings the Indian hunters gathered around their fireside, to listen to the historical traditions which had been handed down through their fathers and fathers' fathers, with scarcely any variation for centuries, kindling the enthusiasm of the warrior and inspiring the little child some day to realize similar dreams, and hand his name down to posterity as the author of similar exploits."[9]

Wisdom stories have played an active role in the continuing history of American Indian culture and they continue to endure the bombardments of social, political, religious, and economic forces both from within and without Indian culture and society. It is this long-term ability to stimulate thought, challenge, enlighten, and provide alternative viewpoints that make wisdom stories so valuable today. Few curricular materials are able to accomplish so much without the negative side effects of moralizing, judging, or providing too many simple answers.

Practical Advantages

A frequent criticism of resource materials used in classrooms and libraries throughout the nation is that these materials tend to indoctrinate as well as instruct, sometimes imposing standards of conduct, ethics, or some kind of morality upon their targets. The State of West Virginia, for example, has recently undergone an upheaval because of this controversial issue. Non-Indian stories typically have "happy endings," conclusions which handily resolve all developed issues with few alternatives.

Many children's stories tend also to do much of the thinking for the reader or listener by capsulizing the important concepts and even making arbitrary judgments about what certain characters should and should not have done. The "kiddie lit" section of any library is ample proof of the point that many young people are not given adequate opportunities for self-discovery, thought, and individual interpretation of what they experience vicariously through reading and listening.

Indian wisdom stories fill the void described above. One primary value to wisdom stories is in their time-tested ability to stimulate deductive and inductive reasoning, enlighten, and provide alternative viewpoints. William Shelton, Snohomish chief, stressed the capacity of wisdom stories to stimulate thought and provide opportunities for inductive application and learning among Indian children. He said, "My parents, uncles and great uncles told me, in days gone by, stories that would create in me the desire to become brave, and good, and strong, to become a good speaker, a good leader."[10] In other words, Indian wisdom stories are not dogmatic, over-simplified, prescriptive teachings. They are highly individualistic learning experiences from which wisdom can be sought and self-discovery can be enhanced.

Concepts and Principles Taught

Native American thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs are clearly distinguished by their wisdom stories, as pointed out before. They also are especially beneficial in teaching alternative viewpoints and concepts about all aspects of life to children, within and outside Indian culture. A very small list of specific concepts, principles, attitudes, and beliefs consistently found in wisdom stories follows. Here are some ideas that

children and adults alike can discover by experiencing the stories:

1. What is an Indian? A fact clearly illustrated in most wisdom stories is that the Indian is not an ignorant, uncivilized, pagan savage. He is a human being who can be very, very good and he can be very bad. He represents a bloodline, but his "Indianness" is also a matter of spirit. The Indian professes and lives according to traditions and principles which have outlived his father and his father's fathers. Or, as Wissler said, "A favorite expression of the Indian . . . was that he knew only the ways of his fathers and that they were good ways."[11] Above all, an Indian is not a creature with red skin and long black hair.

2. One of the most provocative concepts conveyed by wisdom stories is that "different" means just that--different--not better or worse. This is an Indian thought, that everything can be looked at from many different perspectives, other than right/wrong, good/bad, positive/negative, etc. For example, in one of the Coyote stories, "The Beginning," Coyote at first believes that his name is inferior to that of Bear, Eagle, or Salmon. Later he realizes that his name is different but certainly not inferior to other names. In fact, Coyote, The Imitator, discovers that his name is quite descriptive of his way of life.

3. Indian thought and education also places emphasis upon decision-making in daily living. Everyone is taught to face decisions and to learn to make intelligent choices among the alternatives. But the attitude toward decision-making responsibility is somewhat unique, in that Indians are taught that good and bad

decisions are both possible but not wrong decisions. The only wrong decisions are choices never made. This decision-making attitude is illustrated in another Coyote story, and during this particular story Coyote is involved in an incident during which he puts sticks in his eyes to stay awake. Coyote is to be credited with an imaginative, creative decision, but certain negative side effects are obvious.

4. Everything is alive and has a spirit, including rocks, trees, water, wind, etc., according to Indian perspective. In Edward Goodbird's terms, "We Hidatsas believed that this world and everything in it was alive and had spirits; and our faith in these spirits and our worship of them made our religion."[12] Obviously this explains why all natural phenomena are treated with dignity and respect. Many stories illustrate the point with young boys becoming men by seeking and finding special spirits which will accompany and protect them forever. Some find their spirits in animals, some in special places, and some in other inanimate objects. The Indian tries to win the favor or protection of all these living things in order to avoid natural calamities or hardships and in order to live harmoniously with all things. Indian wisdom stories consistently proclaim this attitude, according to Gridley: "Though he recognizes in the story of the Wisconsin River the erosive powers of water and in the story of the formation of Florida the elemental forces of nature, yet there is a difference from the white man's recognition of these things. The water is not just water, but water with life. The elements are not just elements, but elements with life. And the stories are not mere indulgences of fancy, but events that actually transpired."[13] The Indian, then,

has more than an appreciation or respect for the land, water, and air. He worships them. The world is an extension of the Indian and he is an extension of the world. The two are harmonious, inseparable, and unified.

5. The Indian does not live in a secret world. His mind is neither mysterious, incomprehensible, nor primitive. Yet, Indian philosophy does include a concept very difficult for non-Indians to comprehend -- the concept of power. To Indian people power is not an "earned" position of ascendancy over others; power is usually not associated with authority, control, or might. These meanings of power put too much emphasis upon something given or something deserved from other people. Indian people view it as something that is developed from within man or nature. Specifically, power is the capacity to overcome human weaknesses or deficiencies without physical dominance. It is the ability of man, animal, or other natural phenomena to develop abilities, talents, and skills to their fullest. Not to be utilized by one man over another, power is usually developed to make survival and comfort possible for everyone, perhaps even to "heal". One may share his power with another, and, when possible, one may utilize the power of another creature to resist harm or discomfort. To be a good swimmer like the salmon or possess the endurance of stone are examples.

On the other hand, power is occasionally called upon to "zap" others, to make "bad medicine" (i.e. stick games) for others, or to satisfy jealous or vindictive longings. Family songs may have this kind of power. Primarily, though, the Indian concept of power does not reflect man's ability to control or dominate others. The

power of the pipe is revealed in many wisdom stories and is a good example. The power of the pipe to achieve peace among warring tribes in Minnesota is a case in point. "Weapons were cast aside and the nations that had been at war smoked together in friendship. When the pipe appeared, enemies came and went in peace. When the pipe appeared, thought of ill-will or of anger were banished. No other object was held in such great reverence."[14] The Eagle is another example of power. He is the premier winged hunter. He has developed his potential to its fullest. The Eagle, as the stories show, is a powerful bird because he has overcome his own weaknesses, not because he has physical dominance over other winged animals. Similarly, the Indian seeks the power of one who has achieved his fullest possible potential.

Conclusion

"Grouped around the hearth fires of their dwellings," wrote Carl Dentzel, "the young and old loved to hear the tales relating to the entire concept of their being. Too few of these tales and orations have been remembered or recorded for the benefit of modern society. American life would have been richer, indeed, had our heritage from the American Indian been appreciated and preserved."[15] How unfortunate it is that Indian wisdom stories are so commonly referred to in the past tense and that they are so frequently labeled as mere "tales." These entertainments and lessons are still very much alive and apropos today. They are unsurpassed among other resources and materials for their capacity to stimulate thought, discovery, and individual interpretation. And they are particularly useful and adaptable for cross-cultural experiences. Wisdom stories take you to the cross-roads, but they do not insist that one path is better than

another. One pathway may lend itself to traditional Western thought, another pathway to Indian tradition. What an exciting prospect to at least have a choice or to be exposed to something brand new! For most of us, such is possible through Indian wisdom stories, and, in Frederick Turner's opinion th rewards are worth seeking: "The words of the Indian, then, are a po ential source of cultural health for us. They are a way into another and necessary view of our world, and we need to take them seriously, not merely as 'folklore.'"[16]

Footnotes

[1]Ella E. Clark, Indian Legends from the Northern Rockies (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), p. 24.

[2]Charles Hamilton, ed., Cry of the Thunderbird (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 68.

[3]Clark, p. 24.

[4]Stan Steiner, The New Indians (New York: Dell Pub. Co., Inc., 1968), p. 118.

[5]Clark, p. 27.

[6]Virginia I. Armstrong, ed., I Have Spoken (Chicago: The Swallow Press, Inc., 1971), p. 131.

[7]Steiner, p. 118.

[8]Louis T. Jones, So Say the Indians (San Antonio: The Naylor Co., 1970), pp. xiv-xv.

[9]Hamilton, p. 32.

[10]Steiner, p. 118.

[11]Clark Wissler, Indians of the United States (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1966), p. 307.

[12]Hamilton, p. 73.

[13]Marion E. Gridley, Indian Legends of American Scenes (Northbrook, Ill.: Hubbard Press, 1939), p. 10.

[14]Gridley, p. 64.

[15]Jones, p. x.

[16]Armstrong, p. xiv.

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